THE FEDERAL FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

A dialogue presented by Mr. J. O. Clarke, Chief of the Central District, Federal Food and Drug Administration, and a representative of a Chicago high school. Broadcast over Station WJJD on Monday, April 12, 1937, at 2:15 p.m., in the "Future Citizens" series sponsored by the Business and Professional Women's Club, Chicago.

--ooOoo--

MR. CLARKE:

So you want me to tell you something about the Federal Food and Drug Administration.

STUDENT:

If you will, Mr. Clarke. I've made out a list of questions to ask you -- but please don't ask me any questions!

CLARKE:

Why not?

STUDENT:

Because -- I don't know much about the Food and Drug Administration. It didn't take me long to find that out.

CLARKE:

Well now we'll see that you learn something about the Food and Drug Administration. It comes mighty close to your every-day living -- whenever you buy a pound of tea or coffee, a pound of butter, a can of shrimp, a jar of preserves, or mayonnaise.

STUDENT:

How about orangeade? And chocolate candy?

CLARKE:

Oh yes, orangeade and chocolate candy, too. That's because the Food and Drug Administration enforces the Federal Food and Drugs Act, more commonly known as the National Pure Food Law. The work of the Administration also concerns other products -- poultry remedies, fungicides, insecticides, household ammonia, toy chemistry sets -- even Easter egg dyes.

STUDENT:

Why Easter egg dyes, Mr. Clarke? And toy chemistry sets?

CLARKE:

Well, if the chemicals are too strong, children may be burned. If the Easter egg dyes contain arsenic or lead, children may be poisoned. But let's have the questions on your list, Miss _____.

STUDENT:

My first question: What is the purpose of the Food and Drug Administration?

CLARKE: (SLOWLY)

Well, the Food and Drug Administration was created by Congress, in 1927, for the specific purpose of administering a group of laws. A group of laws designed to promote purity, and truthful labeling, in certain commodities essential to the public health and to the economic welfare of the Nation. . . . Does that answer your question?

STUDENT:

That's too good, Mr. Clarke! I knew the Food and Drug Administration enforced the Food and Drugs Act, or the Pure Food Law, but you said a "group of laws." How many are there?

CLARKE:

There are seven, so far. The Food and Drugs Act is first and most important, but the others are important too, for the health or economic welfare of "future citizens".

STUDENT:

What are the other laws?

CLARKE:

The Insecticide Act, the Caustic Poison Act, the Naval Stores Act, the Import Milk Act, the Filled Milk Act -- and the National Tea Act.

STUDENT:

I wish you had time to tell us about each one.

CLARKE:

Some other day, perhaps. But the Food and Drugs Act is most important. As you probably know, it prohibits interstate commerce in adulterated or misbranded manufactured or natural foods, beverages, stock feeds, remedies, drugs, and medicines.

STUDENT:

The Food and Drugs Act requires labels on these products, too, doesn't it?

CLARKE:

Not necessarily. But most food and drug products are labeled, and bear certain required information. For example, all food in package form -- breakfast foods, macaroni, canned foods and the like -- must bear a statement of correct net weight, or net volume.

STUDENT:

How are drugs labeled?

CLARKE:

All drugs must bear a statement of the amount of alcohol and certain other specified drugs of a habit-forming or narcotic character which they may contain. But perhaps of equal importance is the requirement that all label statements must be true. Labels give the consumer a lucky break. Read the label on a jar of preserves, for instance, and you'll learn exactly what weight of preserves you're getting. If the product is not a pure preserve, but one that has been "stretched," with pectin, the label will tell you that fact. If you're considering buying a jar of preserves, and can't make up your mind which of two different sizes to buy, read the "net contents" statements, and a little mental arithmetic will show you which is the better value.

STUDENT:

Oh I always read the "net contents" statements, Mr. Clarke.

CLARKE:

I see you're a good consumer.

STUDENT:

Well, I'm especially interested in foods. I'd like to know more about the National Tea Act. Does the Food and Drug Administration inspect all the tea that comes to the United States?

CLARKE:

Every bit of it. All importations of tea, from China, Japan, India -- wherever tea comes from. The National Tea Act provides for this inspection, and also for admission into the United States of only such tea as meets the standards of "quality, purity, and fitness for consumption" set by the United States Government.

STUDENT:

How long have we had a Tea Act?

CLARKE:

Why, ever since 1883. Before that time, the United States seemed to be the dumping ground for the world's worst tea. But now -- well, last year our Federal inspectors examined more than 84 million pounds of tea, and they rejected less than 71 thousand pounds -- a mere drop in the bucket, or the tea-cup, I should say. By the way, Miss _____, do you know the difference between black tea, green tea, and oolong?

STUDENT:

Yes sir. I do!

CLARKE:

Smart girl. What do you know about orange pekoe? Has it anything to do with oranges?

STUDENT:

Not a thing!

CLARKE:

Correct. We'll have to put you on the United States Board of Tea Experts -- appointed each year by the Secretary of Agriculture, to establish tea standards.

STUDENT:

I'm afraid they'd think I wasn't much of an "expert." Do you -- Does the Food and Drug Administration inspect all the food from foreign countries? Coffee, and nuts?

CLARKE:

Our force is too small to inspect every single importation, so we give special attention to foods suspected of being impure. One product that keeps our inspectors busy, when round-the-world ships come into port, is spices. . . . But what's your next question, Miss _____.

STUDENT:

Let's see. . . . Where are the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration?

CLARKE:

In Washington, D. C. For purposes of food and drug supervision, the country is divided into three Districts -- Eastern, Central, and Western. We have branch stations in sixteen cities, including Chicago.

STUDENT:

And you are the chief of the Central District.

CLARKE:

That's right.

STUDENT:

You must have a great many responsibilities, Mr. Clarke, if you look after all the foods and drugs -- and insecticides, and imported milk, and poisons, and naval stores, and tea -- that come into Chicago. I wish you'd tell us just how you work.

CLARKE:

How I work?

STUDENT:

Yes. Suppose you thought somebody in Chicago was selling food not fit to eat. Just what would you do?

CLARKE:

Well, rather let me tell you what the Food and Drug Administration would do. Every one of those sixteen branch stations I mentioned has a well-equipped laboratory, and a force of chemists, inspectors, and clerks. Their obligation is to see that interstate shipments of adulterated and misbranded foods and drugs are removed from the market, and that those responsible are prosecuted. Now the Food and Drug law is intended primarily to protect consumers, so naturally we give first attention to foods which may be harmful, filthy, or decomposed; to medicines which may be falsely labeled as useful in treatments of serious diseases -- like fake consumption and cancer cures; and to important drugs lacking in medicinal potency. Of course, we also attend to types of adulteration that are just plain cheats -- like short-weight products.

STUDENT:

How do you remove a food from the market, if it is unwholesome, or filthy?

CLARKE:

Well, let me illustrate with tomato catsup, a food that caused us a lot of trouble thirty years ago, when the Pure Food Law went into effect. In those days, many manufacturers of tomato catsup were extraordinarily careless. They used tomatoes that were just plain rotten, and they covered up the rotten quality with spices and color and vinegar. Now the Pure Food Law holds decomposed vegetable products to be "adulterated." You'll agree with me, Miss _____, that nobody wants to eat rotten tomatoes, even if they are cooked up with spices. Our problem was to stop the manufacture of catsup from rotten tomatoes.

STUDENT:

And how did you stop it.

CLARKE:

First, our inspectors visited the catsup factories. Of course they found most of the packers doing an honest and efficient job in sorting out and destroying rotten tomatoes, before the catsup was made. Those were the packers we wanted to encourage. But the others -- well, they were using tomatoes not fit for anybody to eat. Now unfortunately, the Pure Food Law does not permit us to step in and close down a plant, just because our inspectors find something obnoxious. The law requires us to wait until produce is shipped across the State line.

STUDENT:

That's what you mean by "interstate commerce."

CLARKE:

Exactly. Well, after the catsup was shipped across a State line, from one State to another, it was our duty to prove, by analyzing the product itself, that it was adulterated, and therefore a violation of the law. Here's where our chemists and micro-analysts come in. They finally worked out methods whereby they could analyze a bottle of catsup and prove whether it was made of sound tomatoes, or of rotten ones. It was a real problem, but they succeeded. So today, if our inspectors, making their routine visits to catsup plants, happen to find a packer using rotten tomatoes -- they don't find this often, nowadays -- but if they do, they immediately report this fact to their Station headquarters, together with information as to where the objectionable catsup is being shipped.

STUDENT:

What if it's being shipped to Chicago?

CLARKE:

If it's being shipped to Chicago, an inspector of the Food and Drug Administration's station right here in the city visits the warehouse where the catsup is stored, buys a representative number of bottles from the shipment, and sends them to our laboratory. If the catsup is made of rotten tomatoes, the microscope plainly reveals that fact, and a report is immediately telegraphed to Washington. From Washington, instructions go out to the District Attorney to seize the tomato catsup, under a Court order, so the unfit food will never reach your family table.

STUDENT:

And then what. . . .

CLARKE:

Eventually, the seized catsup is given a formal trial, and the normal outcome, in cases of decomposed food, is that it is hauled off to the city dump and destroyed, by order of the Court. That used to be the ignominious end of many a shipment of unfit catsup. At the same time, the offending manufacturer was prosecuted, and usually fined for disregarding ordinary decency in preparing food. Now, as I've said, this kind of offense, with respect to tomato catsup, is exceedingly rare nowadays, because of the Food and Drugs Act, and the efforts of respectable manufacturers.

STUDENT:

Then I guess I'll go right on using catsup.

CLARKE:

Absolutely. All you like. I've made this story rather long, Miss _____. I guess my "terminal facilities" aren't any too good. If you have any questions --

STUDENT:

I have one question, Mr. Clarke --

CLARKE:

Yes -- ?

STUDENT:

I'd like to know how the Pure Food Law was enforced, in 1907. You say the Food and Drug Administration wasn't established until 1927 -- twenty years later.

CLARKE:

Well, during those twenty years the Pure Food Law was enforced by another branch of the Department of Agriculture -- the old Bureau of Chemistry. In 1927, the Enforcement Division of the old Bureau of Chemistry became a separate Bureau, known as the Food and Drug Administration. Last January we had a sort of reunion, to celebrate thirty years of the Pure Food Law, and we found that forty-seven of the men and women with the Food and Drug Administration had been in the work thirty years, or more. If you want to find out how much more safe, and wholesome, and clean, our foods and drugs are now, just get one of the old-timers to tell you about the early days, before we had a Pure Food Law.

STUDENT:

I'm glad I wasn't keeping house, in those days. . . . Well thank you very much, Mr. Clarke, for answering my questions.

CLARKE:

I've enjoyed it, Miss _____. Any time you have a question about foods or drugs, you can write to me, or to the Food and Drug Administration, in Washington, D. C.

STUDENT:

Thank you.

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